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Task force suggests standards changes to WKU admissions process

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A task force established to improve quality and access at Western Kentucky University is proposing changing admission standards and the name of the community college.

On Monday, the President's Task Force on Quality and Access, which was established by WKU President Gary Ransdell in November, held a forum for school officials to comment on the draft report formulated by 12 university officials selected for the assignment.

The report outlines goals for the university, including improving the collaboration between WKU and area schools and renaming the Bowling Green Community College to Commonwealth College to show its emphasis on "college readiness, preparation for baccalaureate study and workforce development in selected fields."

But the greatest proposed change is found in the student success portion of the report, where the task force addresses the admission process for students coming to the university from high school.

David Lee, dean of the Potter College of Arts & Letters and chairman of the task force, said the change will create different categories of admission that will enable students to receive different levels of support. Currently, the university asks for a 2.5 or higher GPA and composite ACT score of 20, though it has historically accepted students below that level.

Under the proposed changes, a student may obtain full admission with the same standards, but the category also requires a reading score of 21 and English score of 18 on the ACT.

Directed admission would be for students who either meet the GPA or ACT requirements and are below the standards in reading and English. Lee said the directed admission program will place students in specific classes that may include additional time in English classes as well as required supervised study halls and regular meetings with advisers.

Conditional admission would be granted to students who have a 2.0 GPA or ACT composite of 15, if the university feels they "(have) a chance to be successful with the right kind of support," Lee said.

Those students would have the same requirements and guidance as those in directed admission, and Lee said once all students achieve a 2.0 GPA at the university, they will become fully admitted.

The task force suggests not accepting students with a GPA below 2.0 who also have an ACT composite below 15 as "over the last seven years, only four students with this profile have earned a baccalaureate degree."

"While the university has historically admitted virtually all applicants either to the main campus or to the community college, it should no longer do so," the task force report states.

Lee said the changes follow recommendations made by the Council on Postsecondary Education that institutions need to intervene with students who don't meet the cut off in math, reading or English and then prove they have intervened and made the student successful.

During the meeting with about 30 university faculty and officials Monday in Mass Media and Technology Hall's auditorium, Lee said only about 30 or 40 students fall into the last category, and it would be difficult to tell them "in good confidence that they would be successful" at WKU.

Some faculty raised concerns of how the admission process would be applied to adult learners and extended campuses. Others questioned the vague mention of academic probation in the report that sites "while the university has often been lenient with students facing academic dismissal, it should become stricter about its established standards."

Lee said the process is something being worked on with probation officials while the rest would have to be looked at individually.

The report calls to rename Bowling Green Community College Commonwealth College in an effort to better demonstrate it as a "portal college" for addressing college readiness and preparing students for baccalaureate degrees with appropriate associate degree and certification programs.

Juniors in high school are now required to take the ACT, and Lee said the assessment gives colleges an opportunity to see, at an early stage, who needs assistance with reading and English.

The task force recommends building programs at regional campuses and collaborative programs with local schools in an effort to increase the numbers of students graduating in four years instead of six. The report shows that number increasing, with 14 percent of a cohort that started in 1997 finishing in four years versus the 2004 cohort that graduated 21 percent in four years. Senate Bill 1 mandates the university establish a partnership with local schools to increase college readiness, and Lee said that process may bleed all the way to the junior high level. The task force will present the final report to Ransdell by the end of the month, Lee said. And while the report is a recommendation, he said any changes Ransdell makes wouldn't be implemented until 2010.